DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 209 688 CS 503 638

AUTHOR Reynolds, Mary
TITLE Reflections on Communicologists in Gerontology: A Credibility and Visibility Gap?
PUB DATE Jul 81
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Speech Communication Association Summer Conference on Communication and Gerontology (Edwardsville, IL, July 22-24, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Gerontology; Higher Education; *Older Adults; *Specialists; *Speech Communication; Speech Curriculum; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

Communication specialists, or communicologists, have several problems to overcome before their contributions to the study of gerontology can receive the recognition they deserve. Communicologists, for example, need to define their discipline and expertise more clearly and succinctly. In order to be credible to gerontologists and other professionals in the field, communicologists also need a sound, broadly based understanding of the various aspects of the processes of aging, as well as the social, physical, and economic problems that society imposes on the elderly. Such knowledge can have a profound effect on the communicologist's own perspectives and effectiveness. Communicologists must also become more visible by participating in gerontological programs on campuses and in the community and at major conferences in other disciplines. Finally, communicologists need to share in research involving professionals in other disciplines, and to undertake more research on their own. (FL)

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REFLECTIONS on COMMUNICOLOGISTS in GERONTOLOGY: A CREDIBILITY and VISIBILITY GAP?

by

Mary Reynolds, S.F.O., M.A.,
Professionally Certified in Gerontology
Consultant:
Greater Philadelphia, Pa. Area

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Correspondence address:

Mary Reynolds, S.F.O.,
507 York Avenue,
Lansdale, Pa. 19446.

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REFLECTION on COMMUNICOLOGISTS in GERONTOLOGY:

A CREDIBILITY and VISIBILITY GAP?

As the number of older people in our society increase, a very real concern about the study of gerontology, as well as its practical use in the everyday world, is being raised again and again. Some questions being raised are: Is gerontology only a discipline unto itself, or is it equally important that other helping disciplines also learn generally about its contents before practicing their specialties in the communities? What should be the content of such education in gerontology? What professions should be involved? Who should teach the courses? (1)

Through the years, much of the general input for educational courses, seminars, and workshops in gerontology has been based primarily on health-related and social work experience and needs. (An example would be the University of Michigan who have been involved with the elderly for years and had held annual Conferences of Aging with others since 1948. (2)) Always the dialogue, investigations, and sharing with other disciplines, government agencies, and representatives from the private sector have been based on a recognition that

more knowledge and training in many aspects for gerontology was needed. (3) Emerging concepts and principles are still being identified. (4) The interest and activities in new gerontological courses and programs are far from waning on a national level, budget cuts, etc. notwithstanding. Even the need for communication skills and improvement in interpersonal relations is clearly recognized. (5) But nowhere on the national scene has sufficient professional recognition been given to the knowledge, abilities, and skills of the communicologist.

It is the concern of this paper that communicologists have several problems to overcome nationally before their expertise and special contribution to gerontology can receive the unreserved recognition and status they deserve. 1) For the benefit of gerontologists and practitioners in the many helping professions and services, communicologists need to define their discipline and expertise very much more clearly and succinctly. 2) Communicologists cannot expect credibility and inclusion with other professions if they do not have sufficient general knowledge of gerontology. 3) Commuicologists need to be very visible in gerontological programs and activities on campuses and in other professional institutions; in community settings; and as participants in major Conferences of other helping

disciplines and professions across the nation. 4) Communicologists need to share in research projects involving other professionals active in gerontology, as well as contribute more from their own discipline. Each of these problems will be discussed in detail.

It is not always easy to readily define this discipline and particular expertise in relation to its relevence to gerontology. As William Work put it:

> There are a number of reasons why it is difficult for us to make coherent statements about who we are and what we are about....our society's communication environments are in constant flux....the very nature of human communication - its pervasiveness and centrality in human existence - makes it difficult to define and delimit our teaching and research concerns. All of this leads one to the inevitable conclusion that ours is a complex, dynamic, changing field....(6)

However, unless communicologists can define their expertise in relationship to gerontology and its practical application so that other professionals understand what they are all about, it can be expected that the importance of speech communication to gerontological concerns will continue to be misunderstood, ignored, or be taught by other kinds of professionals who will then lead each other rather like the blind leading the blind.

Making themselves clear to others is easier said than done. For example, psychologists and sociologists have clearly defined disciplinary identities. Those in speech

communication are too often perceived as being a disunified field - if they are acknowledged at all - rather than being representatives of a discipline with an agreed-upon focus which unites them. For other professinals, what speech communication has also lacked in its definition of itself is a clear general agreement and understanding of the kinds of questions which are appropriately addressed by them. Communicologists have inadvertently promoted the misconception that what a speech communicologists brings to any collaborative effort is a specialized knowledge within the collaborator's discipline, rather than as a seperate, but valuable, scholarly perspective. (7)

Speech communication (as applied to gerontology and anywhere else) is not only a distinct discipline, but also a distinct kind of discipline. In other disciplines, the central questions they always have to deal with is, "What is happening?" within the content and context area which defines that discipline. Speech communication, on the other hand, is a discipline concerned with the study of a dynamic process which occurs in every social context. Therefore, the general questions communicologists should properly be addressing is not "What is happening?" in a particular context, but "How are things happening?" in every social

context. (7)

What speech communication is, then, is a discipline which studies the dynamic interactive process through which changes are brought about in a social world. As such, there are bound to be overlaps (to some extent) of many other disciplines. However, their identity and definition as communicologists is derived from their focus on process rather than content. And their strength comes from their cross-contextual generality. (7)

The next major problem communicologists may have is one of credibility. Most communicologists have never had any formal training in gerontology so gerontologists and other associated professionals have no way of knowing how their expertise can be more effectively related to their work with the elderly. Somehow this problem must be resolved.

For speech communication students, an interdisciplinary approach making gerontology a minor may be possible (at either undergraduate or graduate level). For communicologists already finished with their formal education, going back to school to take part in a gerontology certificate program is another approach to becoming educated in a well-rounded way about the processes of aging and gaining insight into the social, physical,and economic problems

elderly people encounter. If there are not programs available locally for communicologists (and all too often that is the case), there might be a selection of courses to be taken through correspondence with state colleges or various institutions specificially interested in gerontology and associated with some university campus. Additionally, the Association of Gerontology in Higher Education (in Washington, D.C.) should also be a source for advice and guidance in ways that will help a communicologist become knowledgeable in a rounded, comprehensive, and accurate way. Finally, an understanding of gerontology is incomplete without a broad practicum or a number of hours of diversified volunteer field experience. It is of utmost value , as the consultant for this paper can attest from a regional study she did in 1978, covering ten states, in which the question about the use and value of practicums was raised and affirmed. (8) Additionally, all knowledge should be kept current so all people interested in gerontology should subscribe to at least one gerontological journal. In summary, it is important that any communicologist interested in the elderly have a solid background in gerontology. Otherwise, the communicologist is not going to be credible to those others actively teaching, researching, or practicing in the many helping

professions working with old people.

Since communicologists specializing in gerontology are very newly arrived on the national scene, they cannot expect a willingness on the part of other disciplines, including gerontology, to recognize their expertise if they either do not know that they exist or are not clear what they are trained and qualified to do. To help overcome this problem, communicologists need to be much more visible. They must not keep their spcial knowledge and communication skills locked up inside their own school and departments. As Theodore J. Walwik has said:

> ....Communication has become a central matter of social and economic concern....Today the total information activity in the United States accounts for more than 46% of our G.N.P. The business of communication has moved to center stage! We must respond to this communication revolution by breaking out of some of our old, self-imposed limitations and assert the need for comprehensive programs.... the game has changed. We must seize the opportunity or it will be lost to us. The biggest danger is that we will think too small. (9)

It is not enough that communicologists are capable of teaching and counseling elderly and helping professions in more effective communication skills, more competent speaking techniques, and more efficient interviewing skills, etc. Communicologists are seriously needed to both counsel and teach in the understanding of intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, non-verbal communication, competent and fruitful listening, and small group dynamics.

For this purpose, communicologists are needed in all schools of the helping professions and services where the students could be interested in specializing in work with the elderly in some way. Such places would be schools of psychology, social work, health care delivery schools of various kinds, medical schools, law schools, seminaries, schools of business administration, etc. Conversely, communicologists could actively invite the students from these other schools into their own to teach them much of what they need to know about effective communication with the elderly. Finally, communicologists need to become part of any gerontology certification or continuing education program wherever they may be found.

Of course, this is not easily accomplished. Shortage of funds, internal college and university politics, lack of understanding, lack of recognition, competition for course offerings within their own departments - all these obstacles would have to be overcome. However, the end result of becoming much more visible on campuses would not only meet a real need, but would also create many new jobs for communicologists in an academic setting.

Communicologists also need to be more visible out in the communities. The practical world involved with the elderly is very vocal in their cry for more effective under-

standing and practice of good communication skills. After another recent study in which 105 regional professionals involved with the elderly responded, follow-up interviews and phone conversations indicated slightly more than 85% requested students and returning professionals be taught more effective communication skills and understanding of the subject. (8) Communicologists can provide (either as consultants from a given college or university, or as self-employed consultants) services such as:

1) Workshops and seminars as in-service projects within the various institutions serving old people.

2) Offering workshops and courses in the communities such as in community college settings or in adult school continuing education programs.

3) Enlightening and illustrated talks to community groups, civic clubs, and the like.

4) Submitting articles for professional journals and for magazines dedicated to the elderly and their interests (such as published by the A.A.R.P.).

5) Submitting books for publication that would be helpful, useful, and informative for practitioners in the field as well as for students in the classroom.

6) Being part of the teams of professionals working with elderly in various institutional settings in order to give them the benefit of the communicologist's special expertise and insights.

7) Actively being open to invitations for communicologists specializing in gerontology to speak at other professionals' conferences and meetings.

8) Participating (as a sub-group) in the 1981 White House Conference on Aging in Washington, D.C. in November. Communicologists do have something specific and valuable to offer, as has already been shown, and has yet to be mentioned.

These are some of the many ways and places where communicologists can become much more visible in the communities across the nation.

Finally, the potential for good and the importance that speech communication has for the elderly, gerontology, and the helping professions would not be complete without the communicologists' contributions to research - both empirically and humanistically. The need for research to continue, to expand, and even to intensify, should not be underestimated. By the year 2030 - less than fifty years from now - one out of every six Americans will be 65 or over. Every year, one and a half million people retire from their jobs. (10)

On their own, communicologists need to reconsider <u>all</u> research that has already explored social problems involving the elderly. It is quite conceiveable that the unique perspective on process that the communicologist brings to old research might shed new light on old social problems, studies, and understanding. Communicologists also have communication research of their own regarding the elderly they can also offer.

Additionally, it is also important that communicol-

ogists become part of interdisciplinary teams involved in social gerontological research. This is far more essential than has been recognized to date. Communicologists bring to the shared work their unique expertise with process in an interaction situation as well as their cross-contextual generality.

It should now be clear that communicologists have several problems to overcome that are national in scope. This paper has raised the issues of their credibility and visibility as communicologists specializing in areas of gerontology. It has been suggested that they need to make more explicit who they are and what contribution their expertise offers old people and those disciplines involved with them. It was also pointed out that to be credible to gerontologists and other helping professions, communicologists need a sound broadly-based understanding of, and knowledge about, the various aspects of the processes of aging as well as the social, physical, and economic problems that our culture and society imposes on the elderly. Such factual knowledge will have surprisingly deep and very profound effect on the communicologist's own unique perspectives, insights, and effectiveness. Communicologists then need to become more visible in many and diverse ways. Everywhere that a person is being trained, or is working in any of the helping professions in-

volved with the elderly in an interaction situation, communicologists are needed and should be present. Finally, communicologists have much to contribute to gerontological research.

Over time, the solutions to the problems cited in this paper must be found. For it is only then that communicologists can begin to be understood, be relevent, and be helpful to the elderly, to gerontologists, and to all the helping professionals involved with them.

Endnotes

1) _____, "Foundations for Gerontological Education", The Gerontologist, Vol. 20, # 3, Part II, June, 1980, pages 1, 6, 3 - 7.

2) Donahue, Wilma and Clark Tibbits, Editors, The New Frontier of Aging, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arber, Mich., 1957, pages v and vi.

3) Widely diverse examples come from such gerontologically-interested sites such as: Philadelphia Geriatric Center, Pa.; Center at Duke University, North Carolina; Andrus Gerontology Center, University of Southern California; Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, Arizona; University of Miami (School of Nursing), Miami, Fl.; University of Nebraska; Western Gerontological Society; Maryland Office on Aging. There are too many to mention. Also of late, town meetings and professional, paraprofessional, and other gatherings to send input to representatives to the 1981 White House Conference on Aging in Nov.

4) Comprehensive report to be found throughout the body of The Gerontologist, Vol. 20, #3, June, 1980, Part II.

Endnotes continued

5) Clubok, M., "Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Helping Skills Training Program", Journal of Applied Social Sciences, Vol. 2 (1), 1978, pages 33-41.

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6) Work, William, "on Crises of Identity", Communication Education, Vol. 29, Sept., 1980, page 378.

7) Marlier, John T., "What is Speech Communication, Anyway?", Communication Education, Vol. 29, Sept., 1980.

8) Burgoyne, Sr. Maryann, R.S.M., Director of the Gerontology Certification Program, Gwynedd-Mercy College, Gwynedd Valley, Pa.:

Endnotes continued

a) From a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, Denver, Colorado, March 1, 1980, pages 13-14.

b) The conclusion of followup interviews of a study of the needs of professional employers of a variety of institutions in the Philadelphia and greater Delaware Valley areas involved with the elderly, Gwynedd-Mercy College, December, 1979.

9) Walwik, Theodore J., "Communication: An Emerging Discipline in a Changing Environment", paper presented at the annual meeting of the S.C.A. of Pa., Pct., 1977, 38th, Uniontown, Pa., pages 3 - 4.

10) Demo, Mary Penasack, "Education and the Elderly", Communication Education, Vol. 29 (1), Jan., 1980, page 78.